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ABSTRACT

Zitkala-Sa, a 19th century Native American woman who won second place in an 1896 Midwestern oratorical contest, resembles many students who daily cross borders--geographical, economic, linguistic, and cultural--balancing on a tightrope of assured losses and uncertain gains. Known as Gertrude Simmons before and Gertrude Bonnin after her marriage, she was a well-known advocate of her people during the first four decades of the 20th century. To make sense of her feelings of alienation, Zitkala-Sa (Sioux for Red Bird) turned to the characters of her beloved tribal stories, in particular to Iktomi, the Sioux spider man, trickster, and wanderer whose metaphor she chose to anchor herself. After receiving a diploma from White's Manual Labor School in Wabash, Indiana, she disregarded her mother's instructions to return to the reservation and entered Earlham College, a Quaker School in Richmond, Indiana. "Side by Side," her second-place-winning oration, confronts her White audience with the "Indian problem" as viewed by an Indian. Her speech is a tour de force of rhetoric that balances "controlled rage" against White atrocities with the desire to convince America of the Indian's humanity. One moment of transformation in her life was in choosing her name for herself, a name which proclaims her independence and her cultural ties. Zitkala-Sa demonstrated the same mixture of self-reliance and connectedness in a second moment of resolution--a dream vision that demonstrates to her the need for her to spend her energies in work for the cause of Indian reform. (Contains 19 references.) (RS)

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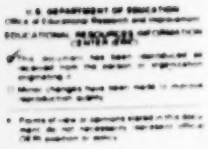

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THE FRUITS OF LITERACY: LOSS OR GAIN

ZITKALA-SA: NATIVE AMERICAN AUTHOR AND REFORMER

A first-generation college student struggling with academic language, a boy recently arrived from Mexica and placed in the California school system, a nineteenth-century Native American woman winning second place in an 1896 Midwestern oratorical contest--what do these people have in common? They resemble the many students in our classrooms who cross borders daily--geographical, economic, linguistic, and cultural--balancing on a tightrope of assured losses and uncertain gains. To arrive on the "other side," they pay a price to individual and communal identity. Nevertheless, in moments of resolution, in moments of balance, they may yet make the tension and confusion of their lives work.

This paper deals with Zitkala-Sa--Sioux for Red Bird--the Native American woman just alluded to. Also known as Gertrude Simmons before and Gertrude Bonnin after her marriage, Zitkala-Sa was the girl who defied her mother by leaving the reservation for a white education; she was the "Indian Maiden," who in 1896 won second prize in the oratorical contest for her college in Indiana (Earlhamite Mar 16, 1896); she was also the "darling" of a small literary circle in Boston who adored her stories about American Indians (Fisher, "Zitkala-Sa" 229); finally, during the first four decades of the twentieth century, Zitkala-Sa was the well-known advocate of her people.

When Zitkala-Sa moved from the Yankton Sioux Agency in South

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Dakota to the "civilized" cities of the East, the estrangement from her family and her tribe was inevitable. At the same time, her acceptance in a white world remained tenuous at best. The tension resulting from her "cultural dislocation" (Young 199) unleashed, as she writes later in a letter, "an eternal tug of war between being wild & becoming civilized" (Letter CM May 13, 1913).

To make sense of her feelings of alienation, Zitkala-Sa turned to the characters of her beloved tribal stories, in particular to Iktomi, the Sioux spider man whose metaphor she chose to anchor herself. "To tell you the honest truth," she writes to Carlos Montezuma, fellow Indian and for some time her fiance, "I am a delusion and a snare. Do not be too sure of me--for I am the uncertain quantity . . ." (May 1, 1901).

The "snare weaver," as she describes Iktomi for the white audience of her collection of trickster stories, Old Indian Legends, is indeed the "uncertain quantity"; he "is rebel against authority and the breaker of all taboos." He represents spontaneity, creativity, defiance of fixed roles, chaos, and freedom (Erdoes and Ortiz 335). A wanderer, always in motion, Iktomi lives outside the circle symbolizing the acceptable life of the tribe, entertaining the villagers with his stories. Traveling forever and at random, the trickster vacillates between worlds: between belonging and not belonging and between "order and chaos" (Fisher 48). Yet, moments of transformation arise--and thus of power--that turn turmoil into tranquility, lack into plenty, and babble into language (Fisher 45).

Zitkala-Sa's choice of Iktomi is not accidental but metaphorical: he contains the tension that stretches her life between cultures. Like Iktomi, she is a traveler, continuously

moving between tribal culture and white civilization and filled with ambiguity toward both. As with Iktomi, her gift is language with which she records and orders the stories of her race. Finally, like Iktomi, she experiences moments of transformation: no longer hungry, no longer searching, no longer alone, she knows herself and her goals for her people.

The Wanderer

Iktomi, the trickster with whom Zitkala-Sa compares herself, is a wanderer. Once Zitkala-Sa has left the reservation, she too travels from place to place, geographically and spiritually. Her autobiographical sketches, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," and "An Indian Teacher," stress the direction her life takes, as well as the ambiguity it entails. These stories are just that: stories, a mingling of facts and artistic impressions bound by the theme of loss. Place descriptions are purposely left vague; significant incidents are selectively heightened; the romanticized past emerges as an idyllic Eden with "freedom, nature, space, community" while the future stretches ahead as a bleak and regimented hell of confinement, cities, crowds, and isolation (Fisher 36-41).

Zitkala-Sa's earliest memories are of a "wild little girl of seven," "loosely clad in a slip of buckskin, and lightfooted with a pair of soft moccasins on [her] feet," who plays, "on that Dakota sea of rolling green" ("Impressions" 535; 540). Highspirited and "as free as the wind," she is "alive to the fire within" ("Impressions" 535). Working alongside her mother and listening to the stories of the tribe, Zitkala-Sa grows up in a universe that enfolds her safely, its evil powers held back through sacred ritual.

The world of the "paleface" first threatens this romanticized version of reservation life in her mother's stories of land robbery and forced removal. Filled with thoughts of childish revenge, the little girl cries, "I hate the paleface that makes my mother cry!" ("Impressions" 536). Soon, however, her mother's warnings about "the white men's lies" are forgotten: Zitkala-Sa sets her will against her mother's wishes and follows the missionaries from the East and their promises of red apples in "a more beautiful country" ("Impressions" 545-46).

When Zitkala-Sa reaches her destination, White's Manual Labor School in Wabash, Indiana, the reality of the "promised land" upsets her individual identity and tribal values, leaving her disoriented and shaken. Represented by the noisy, cold, and hostile mission school, the "white world" rejects as "poverty and insignificance" the life Zitkala-Sa has known until now. Instead of a heritage rich in traditions, her teachers only see "barriers of language and custom" that need to be broken down (The Red Man Feb. 1900). What her mother considers finery, the missionaries label outlandish. "To get them out of the curio class" (Qtd Eastman 55), the bewildered children accompanying Zitkala-Sa to White's Manual Labor School are given new clothes and hair cuts. Hard-soled shoes replace Zitkal-Sa's soft moccasins, "closely clinging dresses" offend her modesty, and short "shingled hair" shame her. The trip East she has undertaken with such high expectations leaves her feeling "as frightened and bewildered as the captured young of a wild creature" ("Impressions" 547).

When Zitkala-Sa returns longingly to the reservation after three years in Indiana, the missionaries' assimilation policy has already made inroads towards its goal: "to [make] over the Indian

in the white image" (Pratt xv). According to General Pratt, founder of Carlisle Indian School, such a transformation was best accomplished by "immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them under holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked" (335). Describing the four "strange summers" she spent with her mother back on the reservation, Zitkala-Sa writes in "School Days of an Indian Girl":

> During this time I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid. . . . My mother had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write. Even nature seemd to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. (555)

Constantly scheming to run away from the reservation, Zitkala-Sa finally returns to White's Manual Labor School. This second stay in the land of the "paleface" awakens in her "an ambition for letters" ("Impressions" 445) that distances her even further from her Dakota origins. The loss of a magic bundle of roots, secretly acquired for "good luck" before leaving the village, and her reference to them as "dead," hint at her loss of faith in the spiritual world of her tribe as well.

After receiving a diploma from White's, Zitkala-Sa, purposely disregards her mother's instructions to return to the reservation ("School Days" 558) and enters Earlham College, a Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. Although she participates freely in the musical activities of the college and contributes to the school's student paper, her account of her college days continues the theme of alienation. She depicts herself as "homeless and heavy-hearted

. . . among strangers" and her fellow students as "scornful," "curious," and only "courteous at a safe distance" (558). Her major triumph, winning the oratorical contest at and for her college, is overshadowed by the racial slurs and derision she suffers at the State competition. Summing up her travels from the child full of "wild freedom and overflowing spirits" ("Indian Childhood" 535) to the "petrified" woman she has become, Zitkala-Sa mourns:

> In the process of my education I had lost all consciousness of the nature world about me. . . . For the white man's papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. For these same papers I had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. On account of my mother's simple view of life, and my lack of any, I gave her up also. I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. ("Indian Teacher" 97).

Keeper of Records

Although one of Iktome, the trickster's, characteristic traits is movement, he is also known for his cunning use of language. In fact, the Teton Sioux credit him with the naming of things, animals, and people. Schooled in careful listening and observing by her mother, Zitkala-Sa, too, is skilled at manipulating words to achieve a desired goal ("Impressions" 537). During the long years off the reservation, she masters English to such an unusual degree that the Indianapolis newspaper describes her winning speech in glowing terms: "Her voice was clear and sweet; her language was that of a cultivated young woman, and her

pronunciation was without trace of a tongue unfamiliar with English" (Earhamite March 16, 1896). Moreover, as Alice Pointdexter Fisher argues, the English "language becomes the tool for articulating the tension [Zitkala-Sa] is to experience throughout her life between her heritage with its imperative of tradition and the inevitable pressure of acculturation" (18). Finally, the language of the white culture enables Zitkala-Sa to become a keeper of records for her tribe--a recorder of current troubles and half-forgotten stories.

"Side by Side," the 1896 oration with which she wins second prize for Earlham College, signifies Zitkala-Sa's first public appearance. There she confronts her white audience with the "Indian Problem" as viewed by an Indian. Her speech is a tour de force of rhetoric that balances "controlled rage" against white atrocities with the "desire to convince America of the Indian's humanity" (Fisher 19). In time, Zitkala-Sa argues convincingly, the "germ of progress" refines every nation, including the inhabitants of Pre-columbian America. Their alleged cruelty and "degradation" merely constitutes a reaction to "aggressions," "broken treaties," and "debasing influences." Zitkala-Sa pleads with her listeners to accept her race: "We come . . . seeking the White Man's ways" (Earlhamite March 16, 1896).

While her speech moves both spectators and judges, some of Zitkala-Sa's later stories please only selected audiences. "They failed to see I was only painting from life," she writes 1916 in a letter (SAI). Loosely related to her brother's inability to find work at the Yankton Sioux agency, the story, "The Soft-Hearted Sioux," for example, receives scathing criticism from the founder of Carlisle Indian School. Pratt calls Zitkala-Sa ungrateful and

injurous to her own race (The Red Man and Helper April 12, 1901). The story deals with the problem of educated Indians who return with off-reservation learning they cannot use but have forgotten the tribal knowledge they need. As the story demonstrates, and reality repeatedly confirmed, "they either [exist] in a shadow world neither Indian nor white, with acceptance denied by both worlds, or they cast off the veneer of [the mission schools] and again [become] Indian" (Pratt xvi).

In addition to protesting the misguided treatment of her people, Zitkala-Sa uses her language skills to collect "treasured ideas" from the old members of her tribe (Letter 20 Feb 1901). The stories, which appear under the title Old Indian Legends, allow her to"recreate and contextualize," and thus to preserve, her tribe's oral traditions (Fisher 159). "I have tried to transplant the native spirit of these tales--root and all--into the English language," Zitkala-Sa writes in the preface to the book. Such transplanting involves changing the legends to make them accessible for an audience outside the reservation (Fisher 50). In a carefully planned introduction, Zitkala-Sa first creates the background for the "legendary folk" she sends off to a "civilized" world. In addition to the actions generally noted in an oral telling, she adds descriptions that show the setting, the characters, and their motivations. References to fairytales and fables help her white audience make connections (Fisher 58). Dropping the traditional random beginning and ending of an oral performance, Zitkala-Sa shapes the tales into coherent and orderly units (Fisher 60) that spell out the moral lessons to be learned.

Moments of Transformation

According to Fisher, Zitkala-Sa "spent her life in balance

between two worlds, using the language of one to translate the needs of another" (20). But just as in the Iktomi tales moments of transformation exist, Zitkala-Sa's life does not always stop "at the threshhold of two worlds" (Fisher 20). The "eternal tug of war" between reservation and civilization knows resolutions without which life would indeed be a "continual purgatory" (Letter May 13, 1913). Choosing a name for herself, and making it known (Letter June/July 1901) constitutes one of those moments of transformation. As Fisher points out, tribal naming of Dakota adults is based on an important deed or event that singles out the person in question (17). Such a name is given by others. In naming herself "Red Bird," Zitkala-Sa proclaims, "at one and the same time her independence and her cultural ties" (Fisher 17).

Zitkala-Sa demonstrates the same mixture of self-reliance and connectedness in a second moment of resolution. Toward the end of the autobiographical sketch, "An Indian Teacher," Zitkala-Sa hints at a "new idea," a "new way of solving the problem of [her] inner self" (97). The resolution presents itself again in another essay, "The Dream," that describes a dream vision of an Indian village, full with people listening to the "chieftain's crier": "Look up, and see the new day dawning" ("Dream" 158). Zitkala-Sa no longer doubts that she is needed in Indian reform (Fisher 39) and vows "to spend [her] energies in a work for the Indian race" ("Indian Teacher" 81). She sees the "petrified woman" she has remained far too long come alive, with her "mute aching head, reared upward to the sky, flash[ing] a zigzag of lightning across the heavens" ("Indian Teacher" 97). Zitkala-Sa knows in her heart and shouts it out in a letter: "I have a place in the Universe and no one can cheat or crowd me by a single

hair's breadth.--" (13 April 1901).

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